

A Brief History of Pantyhose

By Cathy Warner

It starts with tights, the kind with ruffles on your diapered bottom for your first birthday. Dad swings you to his shoulders, detects an odor, carries you at arms-length through the house, and hands you to Mom. You don't remember much until first grade brings thick cable-knit tights, hand-me-downs from Cousin Lucy in Wisconsin. One day after school you chase Jimmy Murdoch twelve blocks for calling you a Cootie Kisser. When you reach his house, the tights are pooled at your ankles, and the crotch hangs to your knees. "Baggy Butt," Jimmy yells just before he slams his front door. Years of knee sox follow.

In seventh grade your parents think you're too young for real pantyhose, but it's part of the pep squad uniform so Mom takes you shopping. You choose nude-to-the-waist hose in an egg. She says, "Wear underpants so you won't get any sexy ideas." Later, you turn sixteen, get a job at Burger Shack and spend your earnings on cheap hose in colors like midnight and taupe. Your friends work at Mega Music and wear jade and pomegranate.

Then there's a two-year phase in college when wool socks and women's lips are all that touch your feet. Senior year you declare celibacy, and exchange flannel shirts for an interview suit and sheer energy hose. You're hired by Williams, Jennings, Bryant, and Gumble and buy a dozen pairs of pantyhose in neutral shades.

A few years later when you visit for Christmas, Mom says, "You'll never find a husband with that unsightly panty-line." On the off chance she's right, you arrive at a New Year's Eve party, where you are, for the first time, nude-to-the-waist under your hose. It does give you sexy ideas. You leave with Father Time, usher in the New Year, catch a cab and fumble past the balled pantyhose in your purse to pay the driver. As you walk upstairs to your apartment, you feel a trickle down your thigh. Eleven months later, you marry Father Time, really a corporate lawyer named Tim. You wear gartered stockings under your wedding dress, and leave them on all night.

A year later on a sweaty summer afternoon, you sit in your office and snip through the waistband of your hose to make room for your expanding belly. A month later, you squeeze into a pair of fifteen-dollar maternity hose, and feel like sausage about to burst its casing. You wear Reeboks and knee sox with your maternity suits the next four months.

Six weeks after Rebecca is born, you're back to work wearing queen-size hose. Your breasts, roughly the size of watermelons, are strapped to your chest in a bra with cups sized in the upper reaches of the alphabet. Tim snaps a Polaroid, proof of this borrowed body and incredible proportions. Five years later, you wean your second daughter, Rachel. Your breasts are now the size of tangerines, and even the "Thank Goodness it Fits" double A cup doesn't. Your former waist, now called the pouch, is your most prominent frontal feature. You invest heavily in control-top pantyhose.

The kids move out and marry, and your legs feel heavy on winter mornings, puffed like hot dogs under your skin. “It comes with age, like varicose veins,” the doctor says and writes a prescription for waist-high compression hose. The twenty-year old at the pharmacy measures your calf, asks your weight and hands you a fifty-dollar pair of surgical grade hose. You pull them on grunting and straining, and look like an Ace bandage swallowed you whole, but feel almost slim. You hide them under pants and ankle-length skirts, and worry about wearing shorts in summer.

Tim says support hose is sexy. You both laugh as he peels them down your legs and kisses the skin rising like soufflé from the elastic. You touch the creases around his eyes, his white beard, liver spots on the back of his hands, and wonder why you're the vain one. He vanishes first, the way men often do, and you switch to thigh-high surgical hose because your bladder has the capacity of a grape.

Eventually your daughters move you to a nursing home filled with bulging blue ankles. You insist on wearing hose though bed-bound. Everyone compromises on knee-high compression and you skip toward girlhood again. One afternoon, you wake up to the faces of your family. The newest addition, a great-granddaughter is placed in your arms. She is beautiful with her squinched up face, diaper bulge and pink-ruffled tights.

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